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Building within the Continuum

Victoria Meyers

Can we visualize a three-dimensional universe which is finite, yet unbounded?

The usual answer to this question is 'No', but that is not the right answer.

—Albert Einstein

Opening comment from his lecture:
"Geometry and experience."

We begin our projects with a strong philosophical position to anchor the visual image and, eventually, the physical space. We begin this way because we see our projects as readings of broader world views. Our architecture is a means of supporting and possibly even confirming those views.

One position which we have taken in our work is an increasing move toward minimalism. By repeatedly utilizing certain elements in our projects we try to reduce our architecture to the most necessary pieces. We continuously simplify our thoughts in order to reach a space which is essential in its nature.

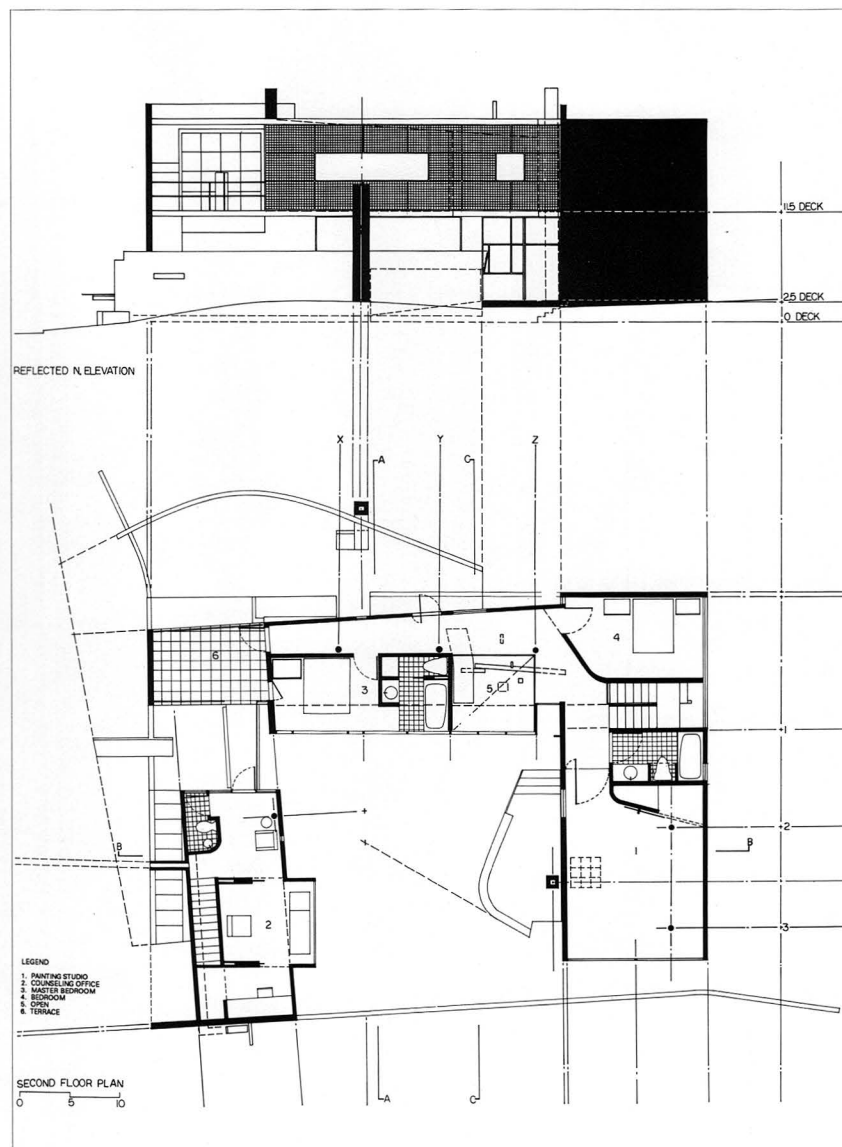
This move toward a minimalist language is not an effort on our part to eliminate richness. Instead it is a way of attempting to make our architecture a more accurate barometer of life as we experience it. As an instrument which measures life as its context we see our architecture becoming focused on the concept of “nothing”. Nothing and nowhere could be interpreted as “infinitely empty” space. We see this empty

space as an appropriate place in which to discover a limitless terrain. The question is: what is nowhere and/or nothing in spatial terms?

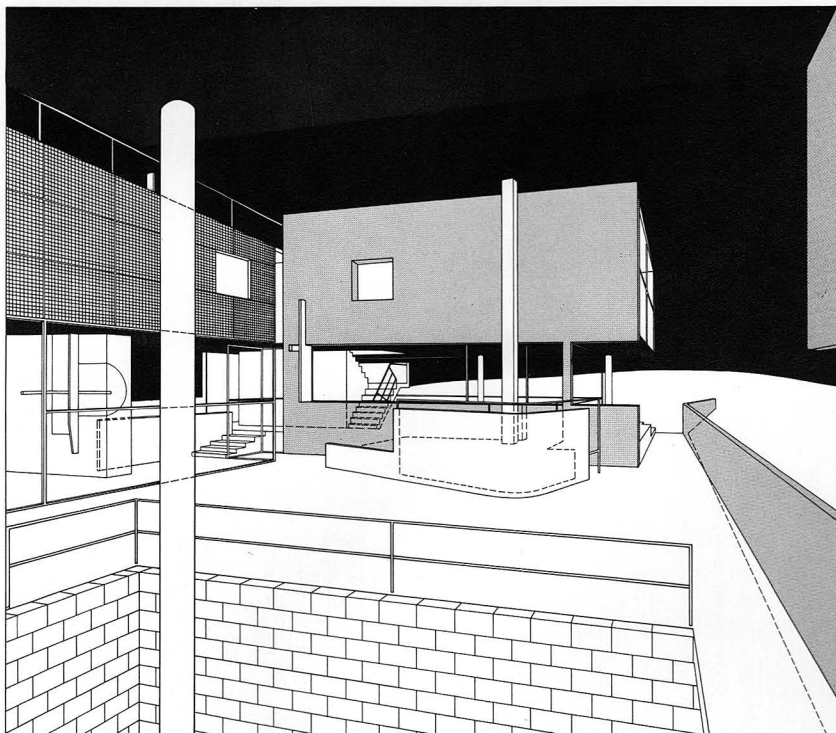
Our search for answers to this question led us to examine the influence of certain 20th century artists as well as contemporary technology. The work of the composer John Cage provided a partial answer to our inquiry. Cage's music gave us an objective means of observing certain ideas of formalist reduction which, in turn, began to allow us to discover the path to 'nowhere'. (Illus. # 1,2,3—Duplicate House)

From Cage we took the formalist definition of the continuum. The continuum, or a continuous spatial flux, offers a formal means of creating the condition of nowhere. Within a spatial continuum it becomes possible to define any fixed location as nowhere or nothing. In 1959 Cage produced *Music of Changes*, a piece based on the I Ching. *Music of Changes*, a formal representation of 'chance', declared all sounds equally valid as music. When all sounds take on equal validity, music becomes part of a continuum. Automobile traffic, Beethoven's 5th symphony, birds chirping, all have equal validity—all are part of an on-going symphonic movement. (Illus. #4—Inside-Out House)

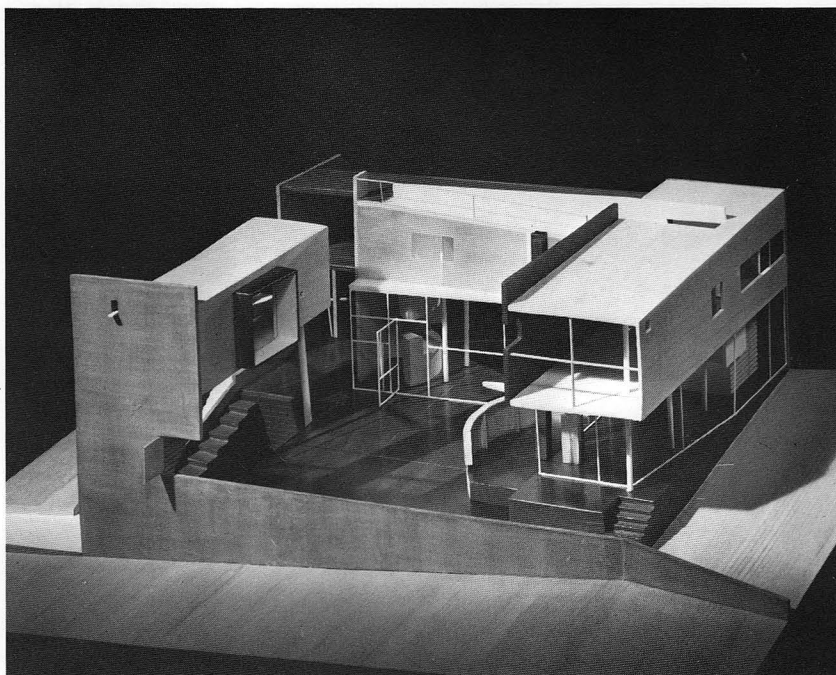
With the technology of the computer we found more clues to our search for 'nowhere'. The computer embodies a



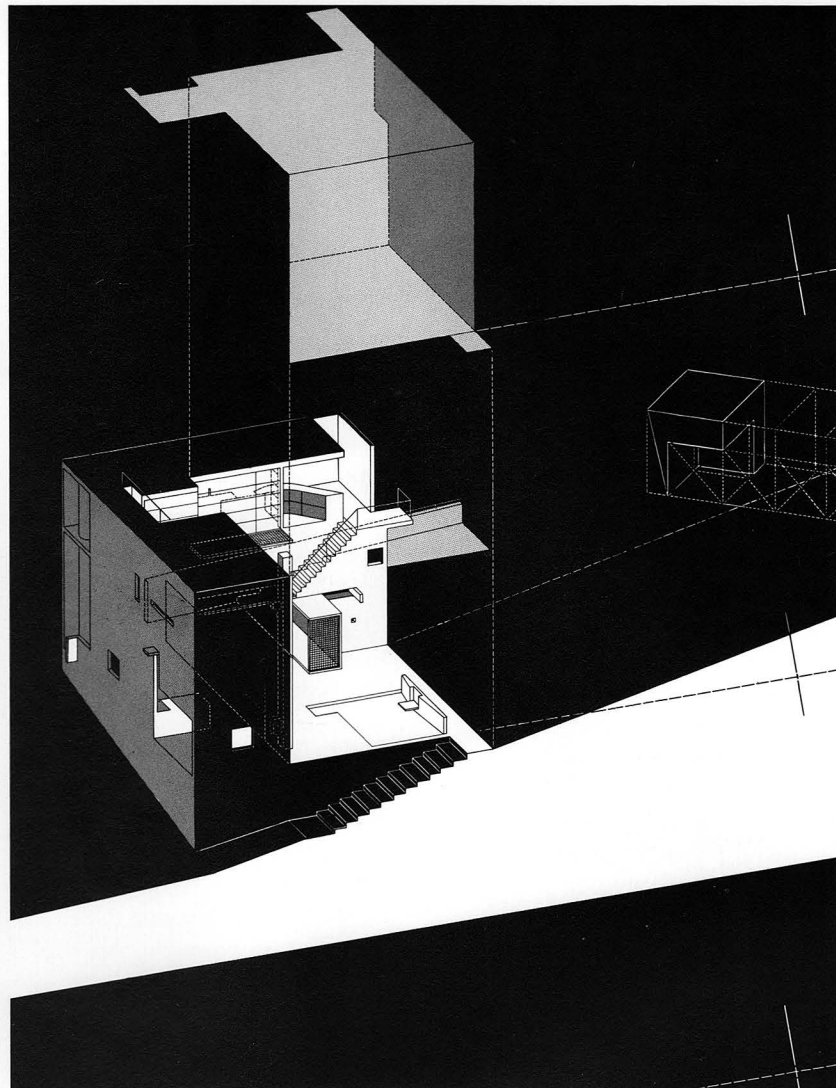
Illus. 1 Duplicate House
House as a reading of 'duplication'. Duplication occurs in section, plan, and with the wall as 'found object'.



*Illus. 2 Duplicate House
View into the courtyard.*



*Illus. 3 Duplicate House
The Wall as 'found object' takes on a reading of site bringing the context into the interior realm of the house. Photo by Jock Pottle/ESTO.*



*Illus. 4 Inside-Out House
Spatial paradigm of the cube as a means of bounding the space of the house.*

trend toward spatial miniaturization within whole domains. Looking through the spatial frame created by the technology of the computer, we see the world being increasingly affected by shrinking scales. As we experience movement toward an ever increasing miniaturization the infinitesimal becomes an appropriate mirror for the contemporary condition. As scale approaches infinity in the negative direction we find ourselves arriving at the space of nowhere and nothing. Accompanying this reduction of spatial scale is an increasing quantity of information. This information is part of an informa-

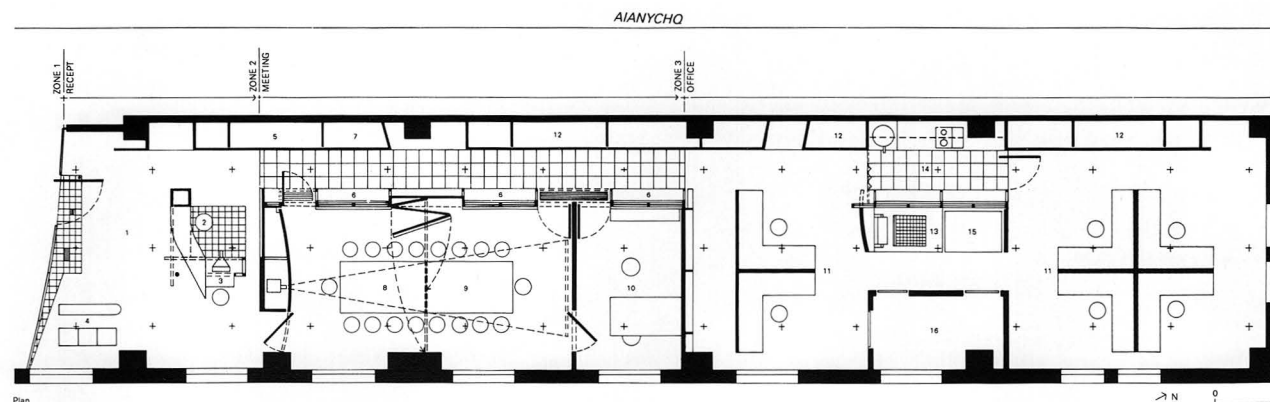
tion flow, or what is today referred as the "information highway". Once again we are confronted with the condition of the continuum which is brought into existence by the fact of the shrinking scales achieved through the computer. (Illus. # 5,6,7—AIANYCHQ)

In our architecture we try to capture the spatial continuum implied in Cage's music and the computer through a very precisely defined minimalist architectural language. The elements of that language include: the wall, the frame, the column, and the object. The first three elements are part

of the traditional language of architecture. The “object” is a direct reference to the liberation of the found condition as a valid notation within the language of representation. Again, we see ourselves indebted to Cage and also, of course, Marcel Duchamp. These four formal elements, the wall, the frame, the column, and the object, are mediated through materials.

With respect to materials and materiality we have been influenced by the German artist Joseph Beuys. Through his art and writings Beuys confronted the inhabitants of the western world with our need to reconnect with nature. Following Beuys we include nature, through materials, as a specific element within the continuum of our spaces. We do this by presenting materials so that their nature is not lost. When materials are subjected to machine treatments which force them into unnatural formations, for example, their meanings become masked and nature is denied within the space.

When referring to Beuys I am thinking specifically of his project for planting 10,000 oak trees. Beuys chose the



Illus. 5 American Institute of Architects New York Corporate Headquarters (AIANYCHQ) Floor plan.

oak not only because of its beauty, but also for its connection to the Druidic religion. This piece in particular embodies the way that Beuys brought nature as an extension of human life into the conception of art. He engaged the natural realm as a direct extension of ourselves. Rather than placing nature in a dialectical confrontation in a 19th century sense Beuys made the natural world part of everyday existence. In this sense, Beuys brought nature into the realm of a continuum. (Illus. # 8,9,10—Hudson River House)

Beuys' works were produced from the perspective of the German avant-garde. As American architects our interpretation of the natural is also conditioned by mythologies of the 'new world'. We, the inhabitants of the 'new frontier', need the infinite in order to forge our individualistic characters in continuous conquest of the new world. Hand-in-hand with this conquest is a desire to define the boundaries of this frontier. This definition becomes increasingly difficult when the continuum, the contemporary manifestation of the frontier, is a condition of continuous flux. This fluctuation, which is the spatial context of our lives, is in fact accelerating. Nature exists as one of several conditions within this fluctuating context, but also makes reference to its past identity as the infinitely unknowable. We are part of nature within the continuum. At certain moments of dissonance, however, nature eludes us as the infinitely mysterious other. (Illus. #11—Canal Street)

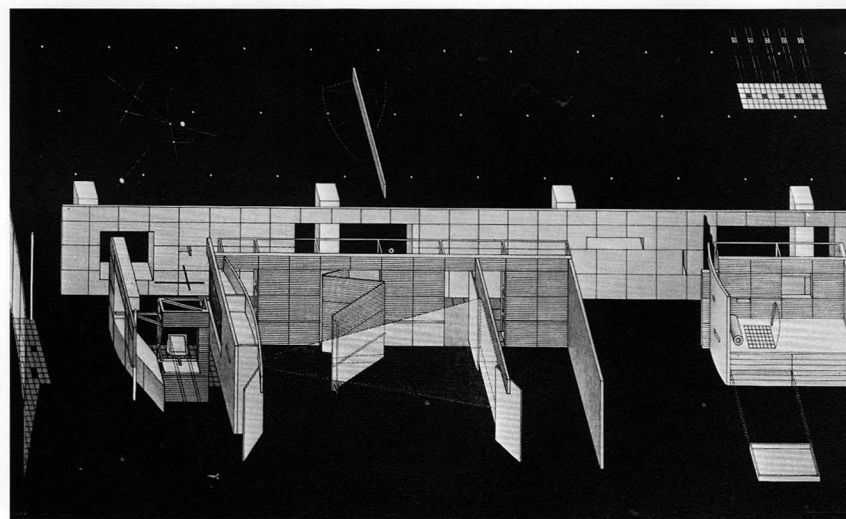
It has become our task as architects to retain a sense of the limitless within our architectural projects by making reference to the infinite through nature as well as through formal manipulations. To paraphrase Einstein, in our architecture we seek to create a three-dimensional realm which is

fixed yet limitless. To this end we attempt to make spaces which seem comprehensible yet, when they are really studied, their edges blur and they merge with their context making them, finally, unbounded.

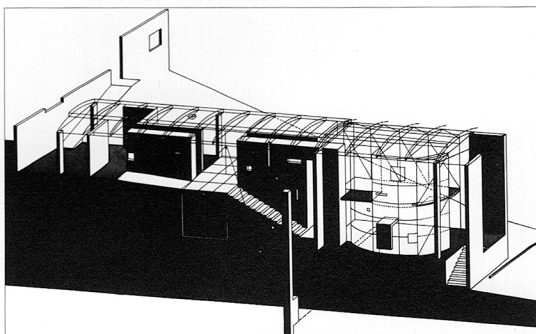


Illus. 7 AIANYCHQ Front Desk — side view of desk designed to accommodate a new computerized information service for architects, “AIA On-Line”. Photo by Peter Aaron/ESTO.

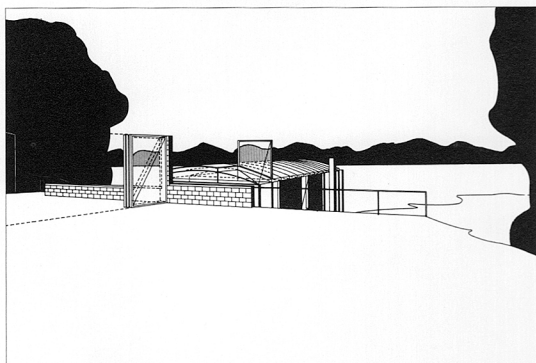
Designs illustrated are by Thomas Hanrahan and Victoria Meyers.



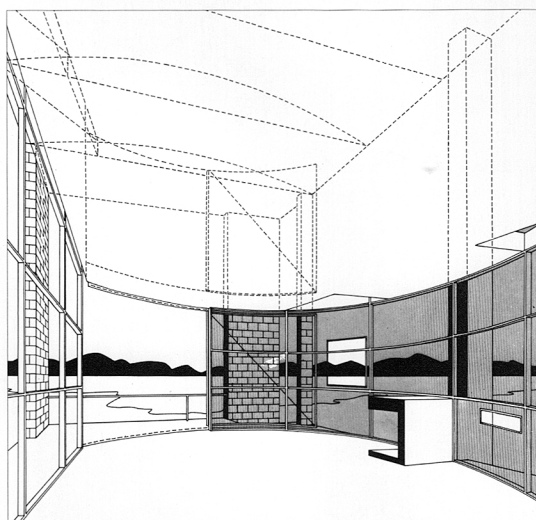
Illus. 6 AIANYCHQ Axonometric showing the front desk as a 'pause' within a continuous flow of information.



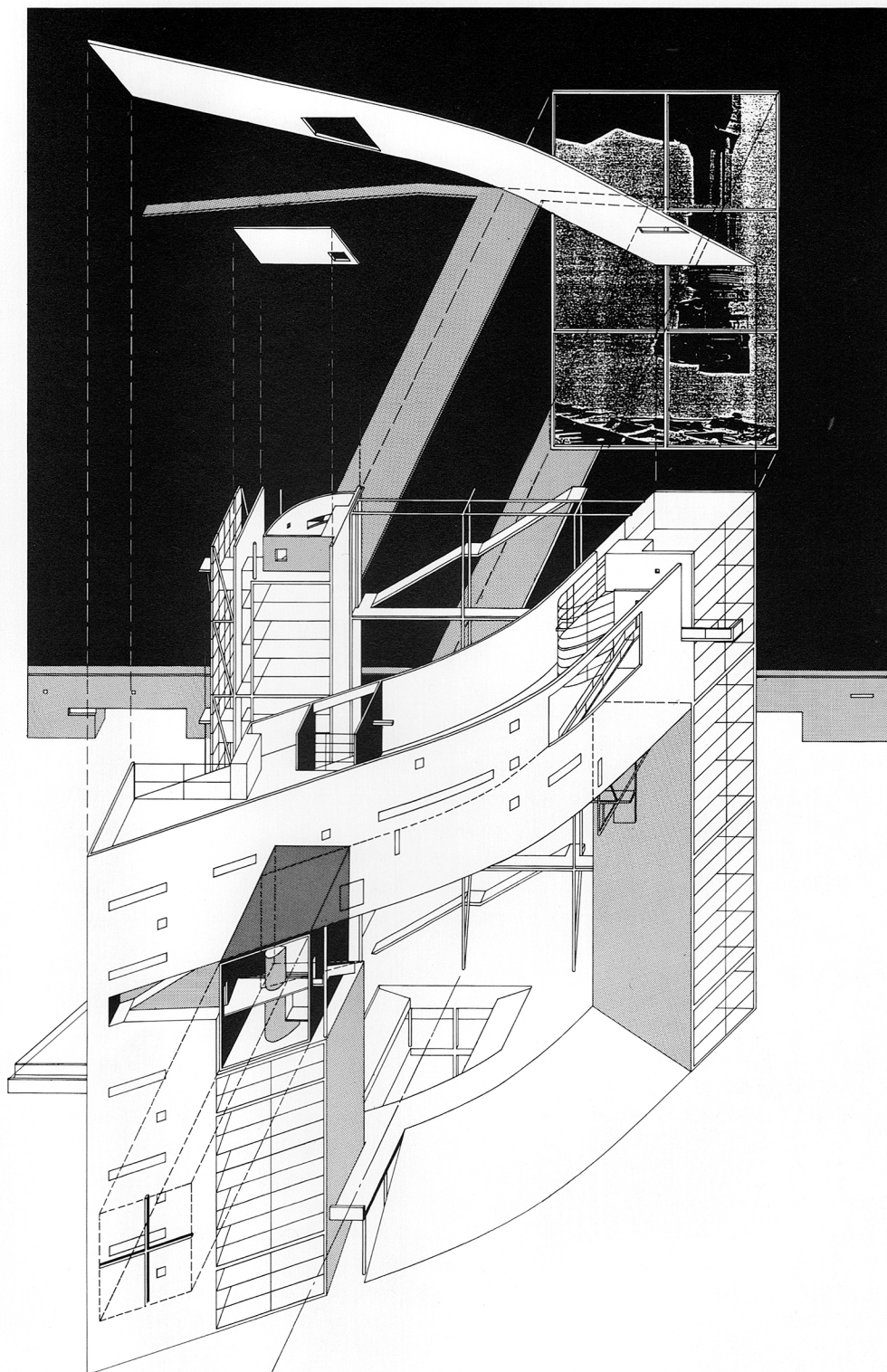
Illus. 8 Hudson River House
The house incorporates the site as 'found object'.



Illus. 9 Hudson River House
Roof framing the view of the Hudson River — site as 'found object'.



Illus. 10 Hudson River House
View within the living room. Living space bounded by the circular arc of the roof and the translucent living room wall. The framing of both roof and wall frame views of sky and river. Fireplace as 'found object' within the space.



Illus. 11 The Circumstantial Void (new development proposed for Canal Street)
Counter project for the traditional center of New York. Proposal sited along the West Side Highway and inserted within the circumstantial void condition of the city as a utopic fragment or as a suggestion for the future growth of the city from the inside-out.